

Hannah Arendt's Fame Rests on the Wrong Foundation

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By RUSSELL JACOBY

A street is named after her. Back-to-back conferences celebrate her. New books champion her. Hannah Arendt, who was born 100 years ago this past October, has joined the small world of philosophical heroes. Nor has this attention come to her only since her death in 1975. During her life, she received honorary degrees from Princeton, Smith, and other colleges and universities. Denmark awarded her its Sonning Prize for "commendable work that benefits European culture," also bestowed on Albert Schweitzer and Winston Churchill. When she gave public lectures, students jammed the aisles and doorways.

Arendt fits the bill for a philosophical hero. She was a German Jewish refugee drenched in classical education and worldly experience. With its frequent references to Greek or Latin terms, her writing radiated thoughtfulness. She was not afraid to broach big subjects — justice, evil, totalitarianism — or to intervene in the political issues of the day — the war in Vietnam, civil rights, the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She was both metaphysical and down-to-earth, at once profound and sexy. Alfred Kazin, the New York critic, recalled her as a woman of great charm and vivaciousness — a *femme fatale*, even.

Yet if her star shines so brightly, it is because the American intellectual firmament is so dim. After all, who or where are the other political philosophers? The last great political American philosopher, John Dewey, died in 1952. Since then American philosophy — with the partial exception of Richard Rorty — has vanished into technical issues; within the subfield of political philosophy, the largest of its figures, John Rawls, remains abstract and insular. His work may quicken the attenuated pulse of academic philosophers, but it does not move the rest of us.

Those thinkers who belong to Arendt's European generation lack her appeal. Take two obvious contenders: Jean-Paul Sartre, who, because of his lifelong extremism and mercurial politics, nowadays evokes decreasing enthusiasm; and Isaiah Berlin, who, because of his extreme caution and unwavering moderation, offers little inspiration. Unlike Arendt, Berlin avoided both political commitment and books on big subjects. (In fact, he never really wrote a book.) While Arendt wrote volumes like *The Human Condition*, with the subtitle *A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man*, Berlin wrote essays such as "Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought" and "Two Concepts of Liberty." While Arendt took stands, Berlin waffled.

It is not only the general bleakness that brightens Arendt's star. Her work can sparkle, especially her essays. Yet with the great exception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her major books suffer from major cloudiness. Ironically, the more philosophical Arendt sought to be, the more opaque she became. Even after the most careful readings, it is difficult to know what Arendt is trying to say. This is as true of *The Human Condition* as of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the book that first brought her attention. But she is the beneficiary of the widespread belief that philosophical murkiness signals philosophical profundity.

Her devotees sometimes admit that *Origins* is disorganized and unsuccessful. She sought to present Nazism and Stalinism as twin representatives of totalitarianism, but left out Stalinism until the conclusion. Sections on imperialism and racism, which are coherent and insightful, lack a relationship to Stalinist totalitarianism, which derived from neither. To make her argument, she yoked Nazism and Stalinism together with philosophical babble about ideology and loneliness. Somehow the "loneliness" of the masses fuels totalitarianism. "While it is true that the masses are obsessed by a desire to escape from reality because in their essential homelessness they can no longer bear its accidental, incomprehensible aspects, it is also true that their longing for fiction has some connection with those capacities of the human mind whose structural consistency is superior to mere occurrence." Huh?

Arendt comes by her cloudiness honestly. She was the student indeed, the lover of Martin Heidegger, the German existentialist who, as one critic quipped, turned the fact of death itself into a professional secret for philosophers. While her liaison with Heidegger has given rise to much high-level gossip — in today's university, Herr Doktor Heidegger's affair with a stunning 18-year-old student would be even more outrageous than his Nazi sympathies — her intellectual loyalties are more the issue. She never conceptually broke with Heidegger and even intended to dedicate *The Human Condition* to him. She did not, she explained in a letter to him, because things had not "worked out properly between us." She wanted him to know, however, that the book "owes practically everything to you in every respect."

In fact a semireligious Heideggerian idiom of angst, loneliness, and rootlessness informs her work. The masses that supported Hitler (and Stalin) did not suffer from unemployment or hunger, but from "loneliness." Totalitarianism "bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man."

To be sure, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her most famous and controversial work, is cut from another cloth; it is lucid and hard-hitting. It is noteworthy that alone of all her books, *Eichmann* was written under assignment for *The New Yorker*, where it first appeared, in 1963, as a series of separate essays under the rubric of "Reporter at Large." Perhaps writing for *The New Yorker's* legendary editor, William Shawn — famous as he was for his ruthless pruning — caused Arendt to shelve her philosophical bombast.

What is also striking about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, however, and the phrase it launched, "the banality of evil," is the extent to which Arendt completely changed her mind since her *Origins* book. In that volume, she concluded that totalitarianism presented the world with something entirely new. Totalitarianism seeks the "transformation of human nature itself." It was a "radical evil," a phenomenon outside of "our entire philosophical tradition. ... We actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that ... breaks down all standards we know."

When 10 years later she covered the Eichmann trial in Israel, however, she arrived at the opposite conclusion. Human nature was not transformed; totalitarian evil was not radically new, but utterly pedestrian. "One cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann," she wrote. As the often-corrosive philosopher and critic Ernest Gellner put it, "After she had given a kind of account of totalitarianism which was half Kafka's *Trial* and half Wagner, the ordinariness of Eichmann was bound to strike and puzzle her."

So Arendt's two most famous books make opposite points, since she never reconciled them. Her minions pussyfoot around the contradiction or pedantically try to harmonize the notion of radical and banal evil. Others are less docile. Gershom Scholem, the scholar of Jewish mysticism, protested in a letter to her that her totalitarian book had offered a "contradictory" thesis to her Eichmann report: "At that time, you had not yet made your discovery, apparently,

that evil is banal." Arendt agreed: "You are quite right: I have changed my mind and do no longer speak of 'radical evil.'" Her honesty is refreshing but damns her *Origins* study. It means that her most important book — the Eichmann report — stands unique in her *oeuvre*; it is not only her least philosophical book, but its notion of evil undermines the theory of her previous work.

Her supporters lack her own forthrightness and try to paper over the fissure. "Against Scholem, who states that radical evil and the banality of evil are contradictory, I want to argue for the compatibility of these conceptions of evil," writes the philosopher Richard J. Bernstein. Never mind that his subject, Arendt, agreed with Scholem. Another scholar suggests that Arendt suffered from a "misunderstanding" of her own work and of Kant's, where the term "radical evil" first appeared. A third resolves the contradiction with the phrase "the banality of radical evil." This expert adopts Arendtian idiom and informs us that "Arendt suggests that the banality of radical evil lies in the disavowal of our own nothingness, our own desolation and impossibility of being."

Arendt's achievement ultimately rests on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as some tough-minded essays and thoughtful profiles. On occasion she was woefully off target, such as in her reflections on Little Rock, Ark., where she glimpsed "mob rule" (and a violation of "the rights of privacy") in President Eisenhower's use of federal troops to force school integration. On the other hand, her essays on Zionism and Israel bear rereading. She was a sharp critic of Zionist militarism. She warned in 1948 that an uncompromising Zionism might win the next war but questioned where that would lead. "The 'victorious' Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense," she wrote in *The Jew as Pariah*. Such observations are among her most salient. It speaks volumes about the state of Arendt scholarship that in the recent book by her leading supporter and biographer, those essays go unnoticed. In Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Why Arendt Matters*, which seeks to show her relevance to contemporary politics, Arendt's bold essays on Israel and Zionism do not merit mention, much less discussion.

Arendt once identified herself as a freelance writer and sometimes objected when she was called a philosopher. In fact she might best be situated in the outer circles of the New York intellectuals, those hard-to-pigeonhole writers and critics of the mid-20th century. She was friends with Mary McCarthy, who had been the companion of Philip Rahv and Edmund Wilson, and she contributed to *Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, *New York Review of Books*, *Dissent*, and of course *The New Yorker*, the periodicals of the New York intellectuals. Something of the polemical vigor and boldness of the group informs her best work, which are her essays and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Those more than suffice to celebrate Arendt. They are also her least philosophical writings.

Apart from those works, her *oeuvre* consists of muddy tomes informed by existential jargon. She is lionized today because all of our lions have long been caged and neutered. Isaiah Berlin once commented — he was too cautious to put it in print — that Arendt was the most overrated philosopher of the century. Berlin should know. Even if he shares the honor, he may be half-right.

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